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ABSTRACT

Experiences with assessment at the following six diverse institutions are described: Clayton State College (Georgia), James Madison University, Kean College of New Jersey, King's College (Pennsylvania), Rhode Island College, and State University of New York (SUNY) College at Plattsburgh. Rhode Island College generates a personal learning plan for each new student using entry-level assessment of student abilities, attitudes, aspirations, financial aid needs, and high school achievements. SUNY, Plattsburgh, designed an Academic Development Survey to examine student study patterns, faculty-student interaction, and value and attitude development. James Madison University attempts to link outcomes to environmental factors (e.g., the relationship between student leadership activities and academic achievement). King's College has a number of assessment activities, including the American College Testing program, capstone assessments in the major, and alumni surveys. Clayton State College identified eight learning outcomes and established criteria for assessing them. At Kean College the initial value added orientation evolved to a concept of outcomes assessment. (SW)

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Six Stories:

IMPLEMENTING SUCCESSFUL ASSESSMENT

by Patricia Hutchings

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--an annual conference
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--commissioned papers
(focused on implementation and other timely assessment concerns; available through the Forum for a small fee)

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This paper is part of an on-going assessment collection maintained by the Forum. We are pleased to make it more widely available through the ERIC system.

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SIX STORIES:
IMPLEMENTING SUCCESSFUL ASSESSMENT

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A paper prepared for

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SUNY College at Plattsburgh
Thomas Moran, Assistant Vice President for
Academic Affairs
Jerome Supple, Vice President for Academic Affairs

It was March in Chicago, and there were fifteen of us around a table in the Hilton Towers, eating chicken salad packed in pineapple halves and feeling our way toward two hours of rich conversation; the subject was assessment.

It was March, and for several months those of us with the Assessment Forum, a three-year FIPSE-funded project of the American Association for Higher Education, had been looking toward our June conference. The plan was to direct the conference toward teams prepared to move ahead with assessment on their own campuses, and we were naturally looking to sharpen our own sense of implementation. Having gathered a good deal of information over the previous two years about who was doing what with assessment, and where, we now needed to know more about the how-to. For me, personally, that meant opening a broader window on the field. Having recently come to the Forum from nine years at Alverno College, I was eager to see if my experience there was replicated elsewhere--what general principles and strategies of implementation (if any) could be identified. More importantly, what could the Forum do to make such information helpful to institutions now preparing to implement assessment?

With this in mind, the Forum set out to identify institutions that might generate principles for implementing successful assessment. A natural first thought was to look toward those programs that are most fully developed and have in some ways the most to teach. A second, more intriquing thought turned to campuses currently in the throes of implementation, those for whom the risks and headaches and happy insights are daily business. We were looking, that is, for a kind of "second wave" of assessment work, not the well-known pioneers (one thinks of Alverno, Northeast Missouri, the University of Tennesee at Knoxville, Miami-Dade), and not the next big wave just now beginning to explore assessment, but a group somewhere between the two, experienced but still experimenting.

Having encountered a number of schools that fit that description, the Forum set about assembling them and eventually brought together in Chicago a manageable yet diverse group of six: Clayton State College, James Madison University, Kean College of New Jersey, King's College, Rhode Island College, and SUNY Plattsburgh.

They talked; I listened. The stories I heard were frank and lively: stories of risks-taken and mistakes-made, breakthroughs and insights. No one at the table claimed to have the answers or the perfect model; yet all of them were in the midst of promising work, not just talking but <u>doing</u> assessment. What this paper attempts is to retell their stories, drawing out common principles, motifs--lessons, if you will--in hopes of moving other campuses toward successful assessment practices.

I

"What You're Doing Is Just Common Sense"

"What you're doing is just common sense" is what Donald Farmer and George Hammerbacher of King's college often hear from visitors who come to learn about their ten years of work: the identification of eight transferable skills of liberal learning, the building of an entirely new core curriculum around those skills, and, more recently, the introduction of a comprehensive institutional assessment program. Common sense. It is, of course.

Looking across the assessment horizon, one senses that, for many, assessment descends like some extraterrestial--suspicious, threatening, unknown, and most of all <u>out of nowhere</u>. Listening to this group, however, I was struck over and over by the good and common sense of it all. As Tom Moran of Plattsburgh put it, assessment is not something you start with, it's a strategy for accomplishing other things, for improving the quantity and quality of learning. It is, you might say, a response to some rather obvious, common-sensical questions an institution might ask of itself:

Who are our students and why do they come here?
What do they know when they arrive?
What should a graduate be like?
How do students change and why?
What factors lead students to withdraw?
What do employers say about our graduates?
How do students talk about their own learning?
Is there a better way to organize the curriculum?
What are the strengths of the institution?
How could we do better?

These are not, of course, the only questions possible; there are important issues of research and scholarship and public service to be addressed when looking at the quality of an institution. The point is simply that the questions which drive one to assessment are common ones, which come from <u>inside</u> the institution, not from outer space, and have, in fact, a remarkable element of the ordinary and mundane about them.

The "common sense" of King's is typical in this regard. For Rhode Island College it was wanting to know more about how students changed that led several years ago to the formation of a seven-school consortium to measure "value added." Once into the project, the College became increasingly aware that assessment, for them, had less to do with measuring gain for its own sake than with using results

to address some basic institutional concerns. With its 8000 non-residential students, many of whom work while attending school, Rhode Island wanted to improve the quality of student advising, to go beyond the usual guidance with course selection to address concerns like time management and balancing school with outside commitments. Assessment, Pat Soellner explained to the group, provides the vehicle for addressing that need. Using entry-level assessment of student abilities, attitudes, aspirations, financial aid considerations, values, and high school achievements, the college generates (with the help of a computer) a "personal learning plan" for each new student. Eventually students will be able to update and adapt their plans each semester. Common sense.

Assessment at SUNY Plattsburgh and James Madison can also be seen in this light. Like Rhode Island, Plattsburgh has, from the beginning, been interested in value added. Although wanting in a general way to learn more about what happens to their students, they soon found themselves drawn by data to what Tom Moran calls "soft spots," areas which seem to call for further attention--for instance, the quality of student interaction outside the classroom. To probe this and related areas of student experience, Plattsburgh has designed an "Academic Development Survey" that looks at student study patterns, faculty-student interaction, value and attitude development ("my experiences at Plattsburgh have made me more sensitive to issues of racial equality"), and more. Wanting to know more about a broad range of student experiences also drives assessment at James Madison. Like most programs, James Madison looks at knowledge and ability outcomes but, Dary Erwin explains, "It's not enough to assess where students <u>are</u>; we need to find out <u>why</u>." Thus Erwin's Student Assessment Office attempts to link outcomes to environmental factors, asking, for instance, about the relationship between student leadership activities and academic achievement, and the impact of financial aid on cognitive development. Again, the point is that assessment comes from (and no doubt raises) questions within the institution; it's not an add-on but an integral piece in a larger context.

That this common sense view of assessment so clearly prevails in this group of six schools may itself be a function of context--the fact that these six schools don't see state level mandates driving their work. This is not to say they're unaware of what's happening in Florida and Missouri and Colorado and South Dakota--states where assessment is mandate-driven. Indeed, several of them benefit from action in their own states. Kean has a state challenge grant to do what they're doing. James Madison is a pilot institution in Virginia's plan to upgrade undergraduate education. In every case, however, the assessment stories told in Chicago describe internally-generated responses to institutional concerns.

No doubt those with a public policy bent would question this view, suggesting that "second wave" assessment programs don't just suddenly and independently arise but, rather, reflect the power of external calls for accountability. Indeed, Rhode Island describes itself as paving the way, or setting a model, for the eventual possibility of state action. But the fact is that these six schools have accomplished a good deal, and they perceive themselves as driven primarily by internal needs, not external forces. It's tempting to draw a conclusion here.

At the very least, one might conclude that promising assessment ventures understand assessment as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Coming, as a it does for many institutions, as a call for public accountability, assessment is easily seen as a project in measurement. It was not, however, proving but improving that focused the stories told in Chicago. For each of the six schools, assessment is a way of exploring and making decisions about internally-generated questions and concerns: assessment as a possible road to better advising; a way of knowing more about--and therefore being better able to upgrade--the quality of student life outside the classroom. Others have seen it as a vehicle for examining patterns of withdrawal or transfer. Some (including elite, private institutions) turn to assessment as a way of better articulating what they do for students, thus improving recruitment and justifying costs.

Perhaps the key word here is context, a term that surfaced over and over in the Chicago conversation. Curriculum, teaching strategies, admissions, advising, what happens in the residence halls, financial aid--assessment both follows from and calls for attention to each of these areas. It is not, that is, something one picks off a shelf or sticks in an office down the hall but part of an on-going account of the nature and quality of the institution.

If there was one message that stood out in the Chicago meeting, it was this contextual vision, this call to see assessment in the larger institutional context from which it takes--and to which it gives--meaning and direction.

As one of the Chicago group put it: "What one takes on on with assessment is not a discrete 'assessment project,' but a larger vision of what the institution and its students can be at their best."

II

"It Looks a Whole Lot Better on Paper, Doesn't It?"

Like everyone at the table in Chicago, Don Lumsden and Mike Knight of Kean College devoted some of their early work to exploring successful assessment ventures elsewhere. When they went to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, they got not only good advice but (from Homer Fisher, Vice Chancellor for Business, Planning, and Finance) a line they occasionally like to quote: "It looks a whole lot better on paper, doesn't it?" Understood as part of a larger institutional context, assessment may be common sense, but, as Knight and Lumsden point out, common sense is not so common. Moving assessment from paper to practice is no cinch either.

First, as everyone at the table testified, assessment time frames have a way of getting out of hand. One need only look at the Tennessee program or at Northeast Missouri or Alverno to note that assessment swallows semesters. King's has in place an impressive array of assessment activities--the ACT COMP at entrance and graduation, capstone assessments in the major, alumni surveys...to name just a few--but King's has been at it for a decade. Clayton started six years ago, first identifying eight institutional learning outcomes, then establishing criteria for assessing them. Like King's, they invested heavily in faculty development, generating a shared understanding of and responsibility for student learning in areas like critical thinking and valuing. Only then did they turn to curricular questions; and only recently, with the foundation (outcomes and criteria) securely in place, have faculty been ready to move ahead with actual assessment.

State level mandates which call for assessment "up and running" in six months deny this most basic fact. We're talking about a decade of work, not a little project in the dean's office but a way of thinking about quality that transforms the whole institution.

And of course "the whole institution" includes faculty. All the most successful programs, as well as common sense, say this is essential. For assessment that will make a difference for student learning (and there, after all, is the acid test) there's no point in proceeding without faculty support and involvement; it's faculty who will be largely responsible for whether data lead to improvements. Unfortunately, even the most enthusiastic faculty may not be able to jump quickly and effectively into assessment. Most are not trained to think about outcomes beyond their own programs. Turf becomes an inevitable issue. Faculty task

forces on assessment take time (more than often anticipated), and that means time away from other agendas. Lectures need giving. Professor X needs to finish her book by tenure time.

In this sense, the notion of institutional context is not only a source of meaning and direction in assessment but, ironically, a potential obstacle. The extent of changes can look overwhelming even to the most dedicated assessment proponent. First the institution needs clearly articulated, agreed upon outcomes (as Ernest Boyer has said, one has no business even thinking of assessment until goals are clear); clarifying outcomes almost certainly entails rethinking in the disciplines (at Alverno, outcomes connected to the larger curriculum forced me to think of my discipline, English, in ways beyond the easy canon-bound definition); and then, of course, new outcomes call for new, more active and involving teaching strategies. Faculty development will almost certainly be called for. Committees proliferate. Semesters pass.

As one member of the Chicago group said: once you're into assessment, you're into it forever. It's an on-going, cyclical process: gathering information, sorting it out, interpreting results, making changes--until you're back at the beginning, gathering information to assess the impact of changes made. Looking down a road like that, who (faculty or otherwise) wouldn't hesitate?

There's a chapter in the assessment story these people tell: a lot of characters are milling around; they turn to each other with plaintive, sometimes angry voices: "What's the matter here?" "Why do we have to do this?" "Why me?" It's a long long chapter...

III
The Paranoia of Exclusion and the Paranoia of Inclusion

...a long chapter, but not the last one. The good news is the eventual transition from what Mike Knight and Don Lumsden of Kean call the paranoia of inclusion (Why me?) to the paranoia of exclusion (Hey, what about me? how do I get in on this?).

Kean's story is particulary to the point here. Not surprisingly, initial talk of assessment at Kean brought quick response from the faculty union (three of the six schools in Chicago are unionized), which issued a statement of concerns; they were, Don Lumsden says, "the right concerns." Indeed, it is in part out of those concerns

that Kean shaped its assessment principles: that the purpose of assessment is to improve student learning; that there are many valid approaches to assessment and that faculty in each program should therefore be free to create their own instruments; that assessment will not be used as a gate to control student entrance or exit from programs; that assessment results are for internal use only; that data will not be used to make comparisons among faculty, departments, schools or colleges.... In a sense, initial faculty skepticism ("paranoia" is probably too strong a word) was turned to constructive policy-making purposes.

Members of the Chicago group had similar episodes to recount. Like Kean (and, I could add, like Alverno), they too had seen the "paranoia of inclusion" at least begin to turn to one of exclusion. Like other dimensions of assessment, involvement of faculty depends in large part on institutional context and culture, and no one in Chicago had a recipe for making it happen. There were, however, a number of noteworthy suggestions:

DO have a clear sense of purpose and do communicate that purpose to the institution. Faculty, in particular, need to know what asssessment will and, perhaps more important, won't be used for.

DO have a plan, but resist the impulse to overplan, with every step in a five-year project spelled out in advance. If faculty are to be involved, plans need to be kept open and flexible, to grow with faculty interests, questions, concerns, and needs. As Dary Erwin of James Madison put it, faculty need to feel a "stake-holder's interest"--a sense that assessment makes a difference for them and that they have the power to shape the nature of that difference.

DO seek faculty involvement early on. This needn't mean the whole faculty at first. Bring in opinion makers; a critical mass of personalities, not numbers, is what matters. Assembling this group in some official way--as an assessment task force, or whatever--makes visible their commitment to and support for assessment.

DON'T begin by asking faculty to approve a every detail of a comprehensive assessment plan. Be modest. Ask only for a suspension of judgment, an agreement to "let this theme play itself out a little further."

DO let people air their questions. Call for an articulation of faculty concerns, which, as Kean College

found, may well be "the right concerns." Indeed, faculty questions make fertile soil for an assessment program. What is it faculty want to know about their students? their classes? What do they perceive as institutional "soft spots"? Even a quickly brain-stormed list of faculty questions might go a long way toward shaping a campus assessment agenda.

DO be careful about connecting assessment to some aspects of the context. Almost certainly faculty will be concerned about the possibility of assessment connected to evaluation and promotion. If assessment is a story, this is a chapter called "kiss of death."

DO enlist student support. Pat Soellner reports that Rhode Island observed greater faculty interest when student support for assessment was clear. Having at first sought such support informally, the College is currently hiring fifteen student assessment consultants, who will help shape the "learning plans" mentioned earlier, share their experience of the ACT COMP, and generally provide a student's eye view of institutional quality. At James Madison, too, efforts have been made to involve students and seek their support for assessment. Students hear about assessment at orientation; they read about it in the school newspaper.

DO consider faculty development a central and on-going motif. It may be in the form of one-on-one consulting with staff from a central assessment office (an approach at Kean and James Madison); it may entail institutional workshops on, for example, defining outcomes; experts from elsewhere may be imported for the day. The bottom line, according to each of these six institutions, is on-going training and development across the institution, working toward a common sense of learning outcomes and a shared responsibility for achieving them. King's College spent five years on faculty development in such areas as writing across the curriculum; next came a fundamental remaking of the core curriculum; only then did Academic Dean Donald Farmer turn to talking about assessment itself.

IV
A Rose By Any Other Name?

Shakespeare may be right about roses--they smell as sweet by any name--but in higher education, labels matter. I recently heard Zelda Gamson report on a project where she

worked with faculty to improve the quality of teaching. Several otherwise dedicated teachers couldn't bring themselves to answer a questionnaire on teaching critical thinking skills because its language offended them; "I just want to teach students to think, period!" was one woman's response. Another reported being unable to read certain higher education reports on teaching because "they're boring."

A similar semantic thorniness presents itself in working with assessment. For several in the Chicago group, institutional resistance to assessment, particularly from faculty, was first and foremost a resistence to language.

In part the problem is a gap between faculty and administrative discourse. Maybe that's a given. In addition, discourse varies from discipline to discipline, with fundamental implications for talking about assessment. The psychology department, for example, may be perfectly happy with the word "assessment"; it's familiar, a part of the context in which they work. On the other hand, such familiarity may bring with it a narrower, more technical definition than makes sense in an institution-wide context. The language of outcomes and performance criteria and educational objectives (all a part of the assessment lexicon) may delight the education department but scare the pants off the historians. For King's College the most vigorous resistance came from the humanities. "I told them to give me the language," says Farmer, "but they didn't have it either." Now George Hammerbacher, Chair of the English Department, describes plans for a "rising junior exam, fondly referred to as the 'sophomore-junior project.'"

With its obvious input-output, production-model derivation, "value added" poses particular semantic problems as one moves from the economics department to a wider range of disciplines. Indeed, at Kean, support for assessment increased markedly when the intitial value added language and orientation evolved to a concept of outcomes assessment--the language of "learning goals." The point is not that there's a right language and a wrong one (Jerry Supple at Plattsburgh considered droping value added only to find the faculty task force inclined to keep it) but that reactions to assessment may, particularly at first, be reactions primarily to language.

Language questions may also arise at a later stage of assessment work, when it comes to feeding data back to faculty. Indeed, that very phrase is enough to stop some department ears. Jim Doig, himself a leader in Clayton's assessment work, bristles more than a little bit: "I'm a philosopher. Data don't interest me, I don't like data, don't ask me to deal with data." He smiles as he says this, but there may be a serious point to be made. I flashed back, maybe five years, to faculty development sessions at

Alverno--being shown beautiful three-color overheads of data on student development, followed by soggy silence from faculty who were asked to respond. Later Marcia Mentkowski and her staff in the Research and Evaluation Office hit on the notion of audio-taped student interview excerpts. For many faculty, the language of individual student experience spoke more clearly than the language of aggregate data, and silence was replaced by vigorous discussion of implications of assessment results for teaching and curriculum.

The point of course is not that audio-taped interviews are superior to charts or that "sophomore-junior project" is better than "value added" but that language is a snag to watch for. And the lesson here (though "lesson" may not be the best word) has something to do with not staking too much on particular labels and keeping an ear out for useful alternatives. Language, like other dimensions of assessment, should fit the context.

V
Ice Cubes and Gardens

"So one day we looked at each other and said: 'Hey, what we've got here is an institutional change project.'" That's how Don Lumsden and Mike Knight describe a pivotal moment in their work at Kean. In fact, institutional change, how to understand and manage it, was a motif running throughout the Chicago conversation. It took shape in two distinct but equally suggestive metaphors: the ice cube and the garden.

For Lumsden and Knight, it was the former. Having done their homework on assessment and called in the usual round of experts, they began to see a bigger picture and enrolled in a workshop on managing change. What they learned there was the ice cube model.

According to this model, institutional change moves through three stages: unfreeze, the slow unlocking of tightly held positions and attitudes; change, the restructuring and/or incorporation of new elements; and refreeze, the firming up (or institutionalization) of changes made. The ice cube is not, I suspect, the most sophisticated model around, but for Kean college it provided an important contrast to what Lumsden and Knight described as the "ice sculpture" approach, that is, carving away at a hard structure, hoping to change it from the outside. As an element firmly embedded in a larger context, assessment may require more radical strategies for change.

Experience at King's College supports this view. One of

the topics I had asked the Chicago group to think about in advance was "the riskiest thing you did." At King's, it was Don Farmer's fiat that "no course presently taught will be part of the new curriculum" (an attempt to forestall departmental turf wars, and a success). It was, if you will, an "unfreeze" maneuver, a working from the inside out rather than chipping away, ice-sculpture style.

The refreeze portion of the ice cube model seems more problematic. At any rate, a second metaphor for change also emerged. Whereas freezing suggests a firm, solid structure, some in this second wave group spoke in more organic terms. There were warnings against too-rigid plans and objectives, particularly in the early stages. For several, it made sense to begin with some general sense of direction but then to cultivate multiple options and scenarios, asking departments to generate "wish lists," developing as many experiments as possible....The metaphor here is not freezing but growth, a garden model.

In its clearinghouse and consulting function, the AAHE Assessment Forum encounters issues of institutional change over and over. Regardless of the model, one theme emerges, as it did in Chicago: start down one road and almost inevitably assessment will take you places you didn't plan to go. Entry level assessment is a prime example. Knowing more about entering students, one begins to fiddle with the freshman curriculum, looking for a better match. When that happens, assessment down the line suddenly rears its head; one wants to see results of the changes. And so it goes. Plattsburgh is a case in point. Having begun with the Northeast Missouri State model, they quickly began to move away from it, discovering they were more interested in the side effects of measuring gain (a centerpiece of the Missouri program) than in measurement itself.

In some sense, each of these programs started one place and ended up another. Research on effective management shows the value of a carefully thought out plan and also the stupidity of sticking to plans too rigidly when circumstances change. The same, the Chicago group suggests, is true of assessment.

VI
"Anything We Did Would Be Imperfect"

Long-time student of assessment Peter Ewell talks about the fact that academics are by nature inclined toward information; they love it, they spend their lives generating, interpreting, refining it. The corollary to this--and here's the rub--is a deep abhorrance for acting

before all the facts are in. Assessment demands a different mentality, a recognition, as the Plattsburgh people put it, that "anything we did would be imperfect."

And here we come to assessment in its more technical aspect of testing and measurement. Having passed through a stage of initial conceptualization (determining purposes for assessment, focus, uses of data...), one soon runs up against the problems of instrumentation. One may, after all, have outcomes in mind but no appropriate instruments at hand. Some, like the GRE, are too difficult for many assessment purposes; others, like the much-used ACT COMP (a choice at Rhode Island, Plattsburgh, and King's, though none uses it exclusively) yield reliable aggregate data but little in the way of individual student feedback. And what about faculty-designed instruments? They seem to offer a better match with specific program goals, and their design represents a further step in faculty involvement, but what does it take to validate such instruments? Who should do so? Is it worth the work?

Both home-grown and store-bought instruments also raise validity questions when it comes to student motivation. To borrow a phrase, you can lead a student to assessment, but you can't make her do her best, a problem intensified by the longer, more accurately diagnostic instruments one would, in theory, do best to use. Some institutions are experimenting with incentives--everything from cash to movie tickets. No one in the Chicago group offered up a magic solution to the problem of student motivation; there was, however, strong consensus that institutions must find ways to talk to students about assessment, not to bribe but to invest them in a process they see as related to the quality of their own education. An essential first step is making sure students receive feedback--promptly, clearly, and in terms related to their own experience.

Beyond questions of validity are those of utility. To what extent will this or that instrument yield data that suggest specific program improvements, or changes in teaching strategies? (The answer seems to be: not many.) And how does one decide these things given the newness of the field? What about cost? Logistics of administration? Again, it often "looks better on paper."

Judging from Chicago group, there are essentially two schools of thought on how to handle such technical questions, and both make good sense. James Madison decided to confront questions of technical validity head-on, early-on, by making expertise in these areas readily available. As director of the Student Assessment Center, one of Dary Erwin's jobs is to advise faculty on technical testing and measurement questions, to keep people from coming to wrong conclusions. "What, for instance," he asks,

"can we safely conclude from data derived from a self-selected sample of students (probably the more serious ones) who feel like showing up on Saturday morning?" One of the next big issues in assessment nationally, Erwin predicts, will be technical measurement questions.

Certainly no one in Chicago took issue with Erwin's emphasis on measurement. However, a second school of thought was also evident. For Kean College, validity questions are crucial, yes, but perhaps less urgent than at James Madison. Kean's approach has been to set temporarily aside the search for perfect information, to let faculty become accustomed to new ways of thinking about teaching and learning that follow from assessment, then to raise more technical measurement questions. Plattsburgh, too, sees validity as important, but, for now at least, the emphasis is less on data in itself than as a stimulus to faculty dialogue and reflection.

In some ways the important point may be less <u>what</u> one does than the need to do <u>something</u>. Yes, everything will be imperfect, it's better on paper, easier said than done..., but a common feature of the Chicago group was that everyone had done something regardless. There was a kind of "jump in and see what happens" mentality. Rhode Island's Pat Soellner talked about their plan to generate individual student advising and study plans using, among other things, the ACT-COMP (usually not recommended for individual student feedback). And no, she admits, they're not sure it will work, but they are sure to learn something. The assessment program at King's has, in a sense, raised uncertainty to a principle of organization. Since no amount of research or consultation could ensure that one approach would be more valid or useful than another, departments have what Don Farmer calls "100 experiments in progress."

In a sense, the theme here is means and ends. If your intended end is perfect data, no program of assessment will satisfy you. Recognizing that the product of assessment will have certain inevitable imperfections, however, one begins to attend to process--to new kinds and levels of faculty discourse, greater attention to student learning, more explicit focus on teaching strategies, a stronger sense of institutional identity. In this way, assessment may have less to do with measurement than with on-going institutional self-evaluation and improvement.

VII
Principles, Lessons, Ethos

This paper began with a boast about the quality of the conversation on which it's based, and perhaps the richness resulted from no one thinking they knew all the answers. Quite the contrary. In discussing the purpose of their gathering, the group was cautious about offering up anything like "lessons." No cookbook. No six-easy-steps-to-perfect-assessment. Indeed, discussion suggested over and over that taking risks, making mistakes is a crucial part of the process, and that the process itself, the collective thinking through what to do and how, may be the most potent, transforming aspect of assessment.

Nevertheless, from where I sat, a good number of transferable principles and lessons emerged from the Chicago conversation. They're best understood in the context of stories told, but readers may find it helpful by way of summary to see them drawn out and set forth in big, bold "two-by-four style."

- Assessment follows from internally-generated, common-sensical questions and concerns, things you want to know more about. This isn't to discount the force of external demands for accountability, but it is to suggest that assessment will work best where those demands are somehow translated into genuine internal institutional concerns. In short, assessment is a means to an end the institution cares about. A corollary to this is: Beware of measurement for measurement's sake.

- Anticipate roadblocks, and see them as a natural and inevitable part of the terrain. Assessment entails fundamental changes in the institution; it's conceptually and logically complicated. Most steps--if they're to mean anything--will take longer than anticipated. Leave room in plans for adjustments and redirection. Remember that it may sometimes "look better on paper."

- Involve people. If improved teaching and learning is the goal, not only top-level administrators but faculty need to be "stake-holders" in assessment. Listen to their initial concerns, use their questions to build an assessment agenda, involve them in interpretation of data. Without faculty support, even the most suggestive data won't lead to improvement. Students, too, need to be invested in assessment. Help them understand the process and its purposes.

- Watch your language. Resistence to assessment is often resistence to language more than to its underlying

concept and purpose. Help departments find their own language for talking about assessment. Avoid jargon. Work for "common sense."

- Think of assessment as an institutional change project. Like every such project, it has its own unique wrinkles, but keep in view broader principles of effective change. Perhaps most important: stay flexible, and listen to the institution.

- Do something even though it won't be perfect. Keep your eye on questions of validity and reliability but recognize, too, that it's in the process of working through admittedly imperfect plans for assessment that crucial changes may occur: outcomes are explicitly debated, questions about teaching get asked, faculty find new ways to think about their purposes, departments talk to each other, institutional identity grows stronger....So do something, and whatever it is talk about it.

These are not, perhaps, earth-shattering principles. They are, however, strategies without which assessment is less likely to be implemented successfully. Most important, they follow from what I can only call an ethos that pervaded the Chicago conversation and was for me it's most powerful message: that assessment is above all a way of thinking about quality that comes from self-consciousness about our purposes and a willingness to examine, question, and alter what we do and who we are as educators.

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